REVIEWS

Lila (2014)

Marilynne Robinson

(1943-)

"For Marilynne Robinson, who has been called America's George Eliot, loss and loneliness do not rule out solace…. Marilynne Robinson tracks the movements of grace as if it were a wild animal, appearing for fleeting intervals and then disappearing past the range of vision, emerging again where we least expect to find it. Her novels are interested in what makes grace necessary at all—shame and its afterlife, loss and its residue, the limits and betrayals of intimacy.

In *Lila*, her brilliant and deeply affecting new novel, even her description of sunlight in a St. Louis bordello holds a kind of heartbreak: 'When a house is shut up like that in the middle of a summer day the light that comes in through any crack is as sharp as a blade.' The notion that light might hurt—that illumination doesn't always arrive as salvation, or that salvation might ache before it heals—echoes the novel's articulation of a more personal kind of pain. 'That was loneliness. When you're scalded, touch hurts, it makes no difference if it's kindly meant.'

Except it does make a difference, or it can. Witness a woman who has just been baptized by the man who will become her husband: 'That was what made her cry. Just the touch of his hand.' *Lila* explores what that crying expresses—joy and scalding at once. In these pages, Robinson resists the notion of love as an easy antidote to a lifetime of suffering or solitude, suggesting that intimacy can't intrude on loneliness without some measure of pain.

The novel, Robinson's fourth, returns to the small-town world and church-steeped characters of its predecessors *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008). Both of these novels examine the lifelong friendship between two Iowa preachers and the entwining of their families. Lila tells the story of the second wife of one of those ministers, John Ames, offering a portrait of a woman whose brutal, itinerant past makes it difficult for her to accept domesticity and love when they come.

The novel opens in her childhood, when she is rescued from neglect by a woman named Doll—a fierce savior and survivor and killer—who carries her away one stormy night: 'Doll may have been the loneliest woman in the world, and she was the loneliest child, and there they were, the two of them together, keeping each other warm in the rain.' *Lila* proceeds to break open the potential of this moment. How does one person's loneliness intersect with another's? What renewal can come from this convergence, and what are its limits? Sometimes one loneliness meeting another looks like prayer in the darkness. Sometimes it looks like a sandwich. Sometimes it gives rise to those more recognizable ways we collaborate on dissolving solitude: getting married, having a child.

The premise of *Lila* is just that: a marriage catches husband and wife by surprise—both of them stunned not merely that they would love each other but that they would love anyone, that life still holds this for them. Ames, long entrenched in his identity as an aging widower, finds himself unexpectedly drawn to Lila—a much younger woman who appears in his small town of Gilead after years adrift, fending for herself. 'I don't trust nobody,' she tells him. To which he replies, aptly enough, 'No wonder you're tired.'

The novel weaves together two narrative threads: the present arc of courtship, marriage, and pregnancy; and the entire past life that delivered Lila to Ames's church in the first place. Ames, marked by early grief after his first wife and their baby died in childbirth decades earlier, is no stranger to loss himself. 'I had learned not to set my heart on anything,' he tells Lila, and she is drawn to this. 'He looked as if he'd had his share of loneliness, and that was all right. It was one thing she understood about him.' When you're scalded, touch hurts: one of the scalded recognizes another, and touches carefully, always. They are both haunted—Lila by the ghost of Doll, the wild woman who cared for her, and Ames by the specter of the life

he never got to live with his first family. Part of the beauty of their bond is a mutual willingness to honor the integrity of their former lives. He prays for the 'damned' souls of her past, and she begins to tend the grave of his late wife, clearing weeds and pruning the roses.

Lila takes as its core concern what might have constituted, in another narrative, a happy ending: two lonely souls who never expected happiness somehow finding it. But Robinson's quest is to illuminate how fraught this happiness is, shadowed by fears of its dissolution and the perverse urge to hasten that dissolution before it arrives unbidden.

Loneliness persists past union. Lila finds herself 'more at peace' in the ramshackle cabin where she first took refuge in Gilead 'than in the old man's house, kind as he always was.' She is constantly thinking about leaving—buying a bus ticket and taking off—a fixation that stems from her deep distrust of needing anything from anyone: 'Being beholden was the one thing she could not stand.' In *Lila*, intimacy isn't pristine. It's a mess, hope and tenderness bound up with resistance and awkwardness and doubt. One day Ames reads his wife a sermon he has written in the middle of the night (readers of *Gilead* will be familiar with these sermons). He's been struggling with the disjuncture between the old life and the new, trying to understand how they can be reconciled: 'So joy can be joy and sorrow can be sorrow, with neither of them casting either light or shadow on the other.' The grip of the past endures, but doesn't hollow out the present; the present doesn't cancel out the pain that's come before it.

Robinson's determination to shed light on these complexities—the solitude that endures inside intimacy, the sorrow that persists beside joy—marks her as one of those rare writers genuinely committed to contradiction as an abiding state of consciousness. Her characters surprise us with the depth and ceaseless wrinkling of their feelings. Lila reflects, for example, that if she left Ames, she would be teaching him 'a new kind of sadness,' because his first wife hadn't chosen to leave—he hasn't yet known that hurt. In the next moment, we see that this fantasy isn't cruel so much as self-sustaining—a way of convincing herself that 'maybe he really does care whether I stay or go.'

Robinson's choice to keep returning to the world she first introduced in *Gilead* is itself a way of paying tribute to complexity. Beneath the surface of each character, the trio of novels reminds us, is a particular and infinite soul. The aging Reverend Boughton—fumbling in *Lila* with the baptismal water for Ames and Lila's infant son—has already been revealed in *Home* as a man with his own vexed relationship to paternity, buffeted by love and sadness for his wayward son, Jack. In Robinson's previous two books, we've mainly glimpsed a more placid vision of Lila—caring for her son or tending a garden—but now her demons and her depths are exposed. In this exposure, Robinson implicates us all. Everyone is full of demons. Depths are everywhere.

Lila reaches even further back, too, offering a bridge between Robinson's fiction of the past decade and her first novel, *Housekeeping* (1980), the haunting tale of two sisters—and three generations of the women in their family—that heralded a startling new voice, and then a long silence. *Housekeeping* gave us Sylvie, a drifter who eventually enlists her young niece in a vagrant life; Lila is another incarnation of the uprooted woman for whom home offers scant comfort. One of Robinson's great gambits in *Lila* is to stage the collision between this itinerant female consciousness and a particular kind of male domesticity: the grief-ghosted home of a man who has largely given up on this world and committed himself to the next one.

While *Housekeeping* left Sylvie wandering, Lila settles—however uneasily—into the rhythms of an anchored life. She makes a home, she tends a garden, she tends a grave. She gives birth to a child. She worries about inheritance in utero, fearful that her unborn child must feel the shuddering of her 'scared, wild heart.' But we also see her maternity as a culmination of her life, not just a rupture from her rootless ways. Robinson has tracked early signs of Lila's desire to offer care: the rag doll she loved as a child, the prostitute's baby she wanted to raise herself, the runaway boy to whom she offers cheese and crackers—and herself as confessor—when he admits he may have killed his father. By the end of the novel, a *you* has crept into the prose, and the third-person narrative has become a bequest addressed to the child Lila has delivered. Gilead was an ailing father offering his son a meditative self-portrait before his own death. Lila is the same boy's mother offering him the story of his birth.

Narrative can become a protest against mortality, against the ways in which our bodies sever the same bonds they've made: bonds of sex and love and kin and blood and care. In *Lila*, as in all of Robinson's books, those bonds are suspect, and they are also our sustenance. We attach despite ourselves, even when we are so broken that we no longer believe ourselves capable. 'You best keep to yourself,' Lila thinks, 'except you never can.' Lila misses Doll with a visceral force—'Her body, her hands remembering how Doll used to comfort her'—even as she resents how that bodily memory insists: This meant something to you. It did.

Robinson's fiction also exposes the vexed terms of our devotion to the wonders of the immanent world. A boy blowing bubbles, a tree covered in dew, a handkerchief stained by black raspberries, the rustling of sheets as a husband and wife settle into bed: there is sublimity in these details, but also a preemptive sense of mourning—our mortal attachments are only ever distractions from the eternal, precursors to inevitable loss.

Flashes of the eternal appear in *Lila* as truths without names. 'I got feelings I don't know the names for,' Lila says, and her husband, speaking of those roses she tended on his first wife's grave, says, 'I can't tell you what I felt when I saw that. I don't think there's a name for it.' This is what Robinson does, what she is unafraid of: she illuminates what we can't possibly describe.

The eternal world also shows up as a reminder of mortality itself: 'the sorrow of his happiness' whenever an aging Ames takes pleasure in his newborn son. So perhaps his sermon isn't entirely true. Sorrow casts its shadow, and joy lives under it, surviving in its shade. This bleed between joy and sorrow doesn't mean happiness is impossible, or inevitably contaminated; instead it reveals a more capacious vision of happiness than we might have imagined—not grace will never deliver you from this mess, but grace is this mess. Or at least, grace is in the mess with you.

Robinson's grace is all the things we don't have names for: the immortal souls we may or may not have, a doll with rag limbs loved to tatters. It's sweet wild berries eaten in a field after a man baptizes the woman he will someday marry. Grace is money for a boy who may have killed his father; it's one wife restoring the roses on the grave of another. Grace here isn't a refutation of loss but a way of granting sorrow and joy their respective deeds of title. It offers itself to the doomed and the blessed among us, which is to say all of us. 'Pity us, yes, but we are brave,' Lila realizes, 'and wild, more life in us than we can bear, the fire enfolding itself in us.'

Leslie Jamison
"The Power of Grace"
The Atlantic
(17 September 2014)

"With her flawed but poignant new book, *Lila*, Marilynne Robinson has returned to the central characters in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Gilead* (2004)--the aging minister John Ames and his much younger wife, Lila--and to the themes of alienation and separateness (and the possibility of belonging) that animated her astonishing debut novel, *Housekeeping*, more than 30 years ago.

Gilead, set in a small Iowa town, took the form of a letter that the dying Ames wrote to his son who was turning 7--a meditation on their family history, his religious faith and his regrets and hopes. *Lila*--which might well have been titled "Balm in Gilead"--is his wife's story, chronicling her precarious childhood and youth, and her efforts to come to terms with that legacy of emotional damage. The novel ends with the birth of her son, whom Ames would address, years later, in *Gilead*. Writing in lovely, angular prose that has the high loneliness of an old bluegrass tune, Ms. Robinson has created a balladlike story about two lost people who, after years of stoic solitariness, unexpectedly find love--not the sudden, transformative passion of romantic movies and novels but a hard-won trust and tenderness that grow slowly over time.

The novel is powerful and deeply affecting, but also hobbled, at times, by the author's curious decision to tell the story in the third person, robbing it of the emotional immediacy of *Gilead* and resulting in occasional passages that seem to condescend to Lila, as an uneducated, almost feral creature. Perhaps Ms. Robinson decided to tell the story in the third person out of concern that such an unlettered girl might not

have the language for communicating her state of mind, or perhaps it was difficult to find a voice for Lila that could comfortably address the big existential questions of life while remaining authentic and plain-spoken. Lila, we quickly learn, knew abandonment and hardship growing up. She was so neglected by her family that when she was 4 or 5, a kindhearted itinerant worker named Doll snatched her up from her stoop and became her surrogate mother. (They are called 'the cow and her calf.') They travel with a band of other drifters led by a man named Doane, living off the land, taking the occasional farm job and a stint here and there doing gardening and household chores.

Doll's love for Lila is sustaining, but for Lila--as for the sisters in *Housekeeping*, whose mother committed suicide and who feared their eccentric Aunt Sylvie would desert them too--the fear of abandonment always lurks. At one point, after "the Crash," when jobs are almost impossible to come by, Doll disappears for a couple of days, and Doane and the others try to leave Lila behind on the steps of a church in a no-name town. That time, Doll does come back, but later she gets into a knife fight with a man, and after the sheriff takes Doll away, Lila is truly on her own. She finds herself working in a whorehouse in St. Louis (where she develops a crush on a cad named Mack), and then for a long time she works as a cleaning lady at a hotel, putting aside money from each paycheck to go to the movies, which help sustain her emotionally.

In the hands of another author, Lila's back story might sound sentimental or contrived, but Ms. Robinson renders her tale with the stark poetry of Edward Hopper or Andrew Wyeth ("Christina's World"), capturing the loneliness of her transient existence. This sense of rootlessness and dislocation will stay with Lila, making her skittish and wary, a wild child, afraid of belonging to anyone or caring too much. After Lila shows up at his church, Ames--whom Lila thinks of as "the old man"--will do his best to try to tame her with kindness and patience, even though she lashes out at him, in the beginning, with defensive anger and righteous pride. 'When you're scalded, touch hurts,' Ms. Robinson writes, 'it makes no difference if it's kindly meant.'

Lila was taught by Doll to be leery of the world--to be quiet, to keep questions to herself, to never owe anything to anyone; and she not only misses Doll and their life on the road, but is also reluctant to trust in the kindness of strangers. And even as she finds herself oddly drawn to this "beautiful old man," whose first wife died in childbirth many years ago, along with their infant, she is scared to leave herself vulnerable to feelings of hope and the dreams of safety and a future.

Gilead emphasized how smitten the 67-year-old Ames was with Lila--the first experience of passion in his life, and so all-consuming it almost provoked him to make a fool of himself, running after her in the street. Because those feelings are not really explored here, Ames's instant and unwavering attachment to Lila--especially in the face of her prickly, often hurtful behavior toward him--often seems mystifying in these pages: We are left with the incomplete (and not entirely convincing) suggestion that his unconditional devotion to her is the behavior of a saintly man of faith, who believes that God 'looks after the strays.' In fact, it is Lila, questioning a church that might doom Doll and Doane and her other 'heathen' traveling companions to a hellfire they don't deserve, who makes the case for a wider, more encompassing faith that might provide balm for all the 'scoundrels who happened to be orphans, or whose mothers didn't even like them.'

There are moments in this novel when Ms. Robinson unnecessarily italicizes and telegraphs Lila's emotions. Of a knife that Doll gave her, she writes: 'Other people had houses and towns and names and graveyards. They had church pews. All she had was that knife. And dread and loneliness and regret. That was her dowry.' Unlike the author's ungainly 2008 novel, *Home* (which focused on Ames's best friend and neighbor the Rev. Robert Boughton's relationship with his troubled son, Jack), however, such lapses are sporadic. And by the end of the novel they've been swept away by Ms. Robinson's moving depiction of Lila's slow, halting acceptance of Ames's love and their slow dance toward marital devotion. By its conclusion, the novel has become a haunting parable of the pastor Ames's understanding of the Calvinist teaching 'that people have to suffer to really recognize grace when it comes."

Mitchiko Kakutani
New York Times
(28 September 2014)

"Over the last decade, Marilynne Robinson has been at work on a project that is more than a little Faulknerian: a series of novels, taking place in 1950s Iowa and revolving around a narrow set of characters, that seeks to use narrative as a tool for meditation, for an apprehension of the world. Her 2004 novel *Gilead*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, takes the form of a communiqué from a Protestant pastor named John Ames to his young son; *Home* (2008) turns to Ames' lifelong friend the Rev. Robert Boughton and his relationship with a different sort of (prodigal) son. To call one the sequel of the other is to miss the point of what Robinson is doing, which is not so much to evoke experience sequentially as concurrently, and in so doing, to trace the incomprehensible largeness of even the most constrained lives.

Such a perspective also marks her new novel *Lila*, which returns to Pastor Ames and his wife, Lila, a much younger woman who is also something of a prodigal. 'And she turned and walked away,' Robinson writes of her early in the novel, 'instantly embarrassed to realize how strange she must look, hurrying off for no real reason into the dark of the evening. The lonely dark, where she could only expect to go crazier, in that shack where she still lived because it was hard for her to be with people. It would be truer to say hid than lived, since about the only comfort she had in it was being by herself.' That's gorgeous writing, an absolutely beautiful book, which is the first thing to note about *Lila*. This should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Robinson, a novelist who can make the most quotidian moments epic because of her ability to peel back the surfaces of ordinary lives.

The book begins by looking backward: to Lila's rescue (or theft) from a family that neglects her and her subsequent Dust Bowl era meandering with a loose tribe of drifters, who together form the outline of a family. More than anyone, she relies on Doll, who took Lila as a child and raised her as her own. 'They never spoke about it,' Robinson notes, 'not one word of it in all those years…. But she felt the thrill of the secret whenever she took Doll's hand and Doll gave her hand a little squeeze, whenever she lay down exhausted in the curve of Doll's body, with Doll's arm to pillow her head and the shawl to spread over her.' This, to me, is where Faulkner's influence asserts itself, in the blurring between inner and outer life, memory and experience, between different levels and stages of time.

Lila is written in the third person, but it's a close third, never dropping its protagonist's point of view. Even more, it reflects (and honors) her oddly inarticulate coherence--growing up on the road, she is taciturn, without much schooling, although insightful and intelligent. Such an approach allows Robinson a certain access into Lila's history, without being untrue to her voice. The basic action of the novel is simple: Lila, newly married and pregnant with Ames' baby, has to decide whether she will stay or go. It's a harder decision than we might think, for she has never been a stayer; she is wary as a skittish colt. 'I just don't go around trusting people. Don't see the need,' she says to Ames, right before she tells him, 'You ought to marry me'--a moment that deftly captures the conflict at the center of both character and novel, the desire to belong and the competing certainty that in a world so unpredictable, belonging is beyond our control. At heart, of course, this is a spiritual conundrum--not to mention a central aspect of her husband's faith. That Lila does not quite share it is one of the novel's many victories, allowing Robinson to explore belief and its related questions with openness and grace.

Throughout the book, Ames argues with his old friend Boughton, who takes a hard line on salvation and the soul. Ames, on the other hand, is gentler, unwilling to see spirit outside the filter of daily life. 'It's all a prayer,' he says, late in the novel. 'Family is a prayer. Wife is a prayer. Marriage is a prayer.' But when Lila suggests that baptism too is a prayer, Ames takes issue; 'No,' he insists. 'Baptism is what I'd call a fact.' The distinction is important, signaling the tension between faith as sensibility and faith as doctrine, which is emblematic of Robinson's intentions for the book. 'If any scoundrel could be pulled into heaven,' she writes, 'just to make his mother happy, it couldn't be fair to punish scoundrels who happened to be orphans, or whose mothers didn't even like them, and who would probably have better excuses for the harm they did than the ones who had somebody caring about them. It couldn't be fair to punish people for trying to get by, people who were good by their own lights, when it took all the courage they had to be good.'

For Robinson, the point is reconciliation, which has long been one of her essential themes. Who are we and how did we get here? What does any of this mean? 'I believe in the grace of God,' Ames says. 'For me, that is where all these questions end.' What he and this profound and deeply rendered novel have to offer,

then, is not reconciliation in a sentimental sense but rather on the most vigorous terms imaginable, in a universe that remains opaque to us, where we must decide for ourselves with only questions to lead the way."

David L. Ulin
Los Angeles Times
(2 October 2014)

"Regionalism has always played an important part in American literature, with, say, William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County the iconic Southern example. Those who have read Marilynne Robinson's radiant Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Gilead*, will remember that imaginary town in southernmost Iowa, near the conjunction of Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska--Plains country, partially Southern in spirit and looking west, thereby broadly embodying the essential rural Midwestern America at a seminal period, from the Depression to around 1950. Although American literature isn't usually known for its religious and philosophical novels, we might think of certain essential works, particularly of Melville and Hawthorne, that concern grace and redemption. Robinson's new novel, *Lila*, combines these regional and spiritual strains of American writing.

Two families are of special interest in the town of Gilead, the Boughtons and the Ameses, each having several generations of Protestant preachers. The narrator of *Gilead*, the minister John Ames, both remembers and looks forward across a highly symbolic, almost biblical American landscape, timeless in its simplicity, mired in poverty and sustained by religion. Addressing his son, Ames recounts episodes of family history and confides his philosophical and religious concerns.

The next volume, the much-admired *Home*, picks up the histories of the two families from the point of view of the Boughtons. The two ministers, Boughton and Ames, careful readers of Feuerbach and Calvin, are thoughtful theologians in the days before television preachers tarnished the good name of the cloth. They are close friends, and though they have some doctrinal disagreements, they have much else to discuss. In *Home*, Robinson describes the 'decorous turmoil' of the soul of Robert Boughton, the Presbyterian, but neither man preaches, nor expects, hellfire. God is too good. 'Thinking about hell doesn't help me live the way I should,' Reverend Ames explains. 'And thinking that other people might go to hell just feels evil to me, like a very grave sin.'

With *Lila*, the third novel about these families and this town, we understand more clearly the metaphorical nature of the landscape, the era and the history. Lila is a migrant drifter child, then a migrant drifter woman, who eventually becomes the much younger wife of the elderly, widowed John Ames--and the mother of the boy being addressed in the first novel. Lila's personal tale mirrors conventional Dust Bowl stories during the lawless, desperate period of the Depression. When she is a gravely ill child of about 3, she is stolen away from people who might have let her die. Her kidnapper and surrogate mother is a rough woman called Doll, from whom Lila invents a surname for herself: Dahl. Lila and Doll are on the run most of the time, knowing no permanent situation, creature comforts or material possessions. More than once, Doll uses her knife to defend them. When Lila finally winds up in Gilead she has only one prized possession, the knife that belonged to Doll.

The child's utter dependence on this woman is shaded by a frightened, tentative wariness that will characterize Lila's bruised emotional life as an adult. The story Robinson tells here concerns the affection Lila feels first for Doll, then for the elderly minister, and his for her, as well as her education and the beginnings of a healed psyche. Told with measured and absorbing elegance, this account of the growing love and trust between Lila and Reverend Ames is touching and convincing. The stages of Lila's strengthening sense of security are carefully delineated, physical relations and her pregnancy handled with careful tact.

Central to all the novel's characters are matters of high literary seriousness--the basic considerations of the human condition; the moral problems of existence; the ache of being abandoned; the struggles of the aging; the role of the Bible and God in daily life. It's courageous of Robinson to write about faith at a time when associations with religion are so often negative and violent. And goodness, a property Midwesterners

like to think of as a regional birthright, is even harder than piety to convey without succumbing to the temptation to charge it with sanctimony or hypocrisy. That is not the effect of this lovely narrative.

Goodness resides in most of the people we meet here, even the madam, known simply as 'Mrs.,' who runs a whorehouse in St. Louis where Lila briefly lives. Mrs. lets the rather plain Lila off easy, charging her mostly with chores like cleaning and stoking the furnace. It may seem that Lila's chaste escape strains our credulity--when, for some reason, we believe in the sinister desperados met along the course of her odyssey. But we certainly don't wish her fate to have been otherwise. Next to the strange, dreamlike autonomy of characters like Doll, who drift along stealing babies and riding freight cars, the whorehouse scenes in St. Louis seem a little self-consciously cinematic, in spite of the durability of the metaphor--and not only because sin is so naturally allowed for in Robinson's generous understanding of human nature as to make them seem superfluous. The almost jolly atmosphere of the place, with its hearts of gold, threatens to violate the novel's grave tone of original innocence and tentative salvation.

As in *Gilead* and *Home*, Robinson steps away from the conventions of the realistic novel to deal with metaphysical abstractions, signaling by the formality of her language her adoption of another convention, by which characters inhabiting an almost Norman Rockwell-ish world (it is, after all, the same period) live and think on a spiritual plane without sacrificing the notion that they are, at the same time, weeding the garden or doing the mending. Characters might say things like 'I believe also that the rewards of obedience are great, because at the root of real honor is always the sense of the sacredness of the person who is its object,' a level of diction that isn't exactly natural speech but one that we understand and respond to with almost reflex admiration, as with Flannery O'Connor or, of course, King James.

Throughout these novels, Robinson has a wonderful feel for Midwestern life, for what people would be wearing, eating, reading. (In *Home*, for example, she notes that when MacKinlay Kantor, who grew up in Webster City, Iowa, had written the grim Civil War prison novel *Andersonville*, 'it had broken the heart of greater Des Moines.') Lila's virtue, intelligence and fine instincts prevail over her harsh experiences, but she retains her mistrust of certain things: 'I don't understand theology,' she says. 'I don't think I like it.' One wonders if that is Robinson's coda to three novels that involve quite a lot of theology.

Very few allusions link life in Gilead to particular historical events, though a character once mentions that he might vote for Eisenhower. Nor is this novel about the specifics of Iowa, despite descriptions of its fields and the mention of a movie theater playing *To Have and Have Not.* (If you were to look for a contemporary cinematic equivalent, you might think of the timeless tone and setting of the Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*)

In the end, *Lila* is not so much a novel as a meditation on morality and psychology, compelling in its frankness about its truly shocking subject: the damage to the human personality done by poverty, neglect and abandonment."

Diane Johnson
New York Times
(3 October 2014)

"*Lila*: an exquisite novel of spiritual redemption and love…. In 2004, Marilynne Robinson, a legendary teacher at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, returned to novels after a 24-year hiatus and published *Gilead*, which won a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Critics Circle Award and a spot on best-of-the-year lists everywhere. It's hard to imagine those accolades meant much to the Midwestern Calvinist, but four years later she published a companion novel called *Home*, which won the Orange Prize and more enthusiastic praise. And now comes *Lila*, already longlisted for the National Book Award, involving the same few people in Gilead, Iowa, 'the kind of town where dogs slept in the road.'

These three exquisite books constitute a trilogy on spiritual redemption unlike anything else in American literature. (Our Puritan forefathers wrote and worried plenty about salvation, but they had no use for novels.) In a way that few novelists have attempted and at which fewer have succeeded, Robinson writes about Christian ministers and faith and even theology, and yet her books demand no orthodoxy except a willingness to think deeply about the inscrutable problem of being. Her characters anticipate the

glory beyond, but they also know the valley of the shadow of death (and they can name that Psalm, too). In *Home*, the Rev. Robert Boughton struggles to save his wayward son from drinking himself into the ground. In *Gilead*, the Rev. John Ames, with just a few months to live, races to compose a long letter about his life before he's carried away to imperishability. And in this new novel, we're finally, fully engaged with Lila, the unlikely young woman who marries Rev. Ames late in life and gives him a son when he feels as old as Abraham.

The geography and the cast of characters are mostly familiar, but this time around we're entering a wholly different spirit. Boughton's alcoholic son may have been lost, but he knew the terms of perdition and could torment his father and Ames in a language they all spoke. Lila crawls into Gilead from another world altogether, a realm of subsistence living where the speculations of theologians are as far away — and useless--as the stars.

The novel opens in a fog of misery. Lila is just 4 or 5, sickly, dressed in rags, when a woman named Doll steals her from her violent home. 'Doll may have been the loneliest woman in the world,' Robinson writes, 'and she was the loneliest child, and there they were, the two of them together, keeping each other warm in the rain.' They survive by joining up with a tough band of migrants looking for work as the country slides further into the Depression. It's a vision of failing America somewhere between *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Road*--poverty grinding away every element of pride until the group fractures under the strain. Robinson has constructed this novel in a graceful swirl of time, constantly moving back to Lila and Doll's struggles with starvation, desperate thieves and vengeful relatives. We see that dark past only intermittently, as a child's clear but fragmentary memories or a trauma victim's flashbacks.

In the novel's present, Lila, now an adult, almost feral with fear and apprehension, wanders into Ames's church. In that moment, the old pastor dares to imagine he might be allowed to fall in love again. But Lila is not easily or quickly drawn away from the life she knew. 'Happiness was strange to her,' Robinson writes. 'When you're scalded, touch hurts, it makes no difference if it's kindly meant.'

This may be the most tentative, formal and charming romance you'll ever encounter. Ames, who assumed his years of loneliness would never end, floats off the ground in a state of anxious delight, always preparing himself for the day when Lila will run back out of his life. And everything about the reverend baffles her. 'You're just the strangest man,' she tells him when she knows she's 'horribly in love.' There seems no end to his concerns, his senseless courtesies. 'He always helped her with her chair,' she thinks, 'which amounted to pulling it out from the table a little, then pushing it in again after she sat down. Who in the world could need help with a chair?' He and his friends talk about people she doesn't know and things she doesn't understand. His constant allusions to the Bible--that old book--mean nothing to her. She can't get over how enthusiastically his congregation sings 'songs to somebody who had lived and died like anybody else.'

And yet she considers the reverend's theological arguments with dead seriousness. Robinson, for all her philosophical brilliance, captures clearly and without a trace of condescension the mind of an uneducated woman struggling to comprehend why things happen, what our lives mean. 'She knew a little bit about existence,' Robinson writes in this miraculous voice that somehow blends with Lila's. 'That was pretty well the only thing she knew about, and she had learned the word for it from him.' Lila doesn't have the luxury of speculating about the possibility of hell; she's lived there. 'She had thought a thousand times about the ferociousness of things so that it might not surprise her entirely when it showed itself again.' The Bible is a revelation to her--though not in the way it is to her husband: 'She never expected to find so many things she already knew about written down in a book.' The images of desolation and abandonment in Ezekiel don't sound to her like history or metaphor--they sound like yesterday. Job could easily have been someone she knew on the road. When Boughton refers to the elect and the damned, Lila fears she may never see Doll again, and wonders if heaven is worth that sacrifice. How is it, she wonders, that these men can worship a God willing to send so many fine people to hell?

'You ask such interesting questions,' Ames says.

'And you don't answer 'em,' Lila shoots back. She's been trained by years of violence and hardship not to trust anyone, but 'he was beautiful, gentle and solid, his voice so mild when he spoke, his hair so silvery

white.' Can she, dare she, give up the clarity of her old life for this gracious man who loves her past all reason? She knows it'll only be a matter of time before she shocks 'all the sweetness right out of him.'

'Are we getting married, or not?' Ames asks her early in the novel.

'If you want to, it's all right with me, I suppose. But I can't see how it's going to work,' Lila says. 'I can't stay nowhere. I can't get a minute of rest.'

'Well, if that's how it is, I guess you'd better put your head on my shoulder."

For all the despair and trauma that haunt Lila, her story is one of unimaginable, sudden good fortune that only her husband's patience can coax her into accepting. 'I can't love you as much as I love you,' Lila says with a paradox worthy of St. Paul. 'I can't feel as happy as I am.' Both of these unlikely lovers have suffered enough 'to know that this is grace.'

Anyone reading this novel will know that, too.

Ron Charles
Washington Post
(30 September 2014)

"Marilynne Robinson's new novel, *Lila* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), opens in about 1920, and it begins with a shocking action: a woman steals a child. Not that anybody seems to care much. The child, a girl who looks to be four or five, has been deposited by someone (there is no mention of parents) in a house for migrant workers somewhere in the Midwest. Most of the time, she hides under a table, but occasionally she cries, and then she gets pushed out onto the front steps. One night, a woman named Doll, the sole denizen of the house who appears ever to have paid any attention to the girl, returns from work and finds her on the stoop. This time, instead of settling her back inside, Doll carries her off to another cabin, where an old woman grudgingly lets them in. The two women feed the girl some corn bread and then try to clean her up:

'The old woman held her standing in a white basin on the floor by the stove, and Doll washed her down with a rag and a bit of soap, scrubbing a little where the cats had scratched her, and on the chigger bites and mosquito bites where she had scratched herself, and where there were slivers in her knees, and where she had a habit of biting her hand. The water in the basin got so dirty that they threw it out the door and started over. Her whole body shivered with the cold and the sting. 'Nits,' the old woman said. 'We got to cut her hair.' She fetched a razor and began shearing off the tangles as close to the child's scalp as she dared—'I got a blade here. She better hold still.' Then they soaped and scrubbed her head, and water and suds ran into her eyes, and she struggled and yelled with all the strength she had and told them both they could rot in hell.'

Despite the chiggers and the curses, the scene is pure Rembrandt. We can almost see the ray of heavenly light coming through the side window. Ever since the publication of Robinson's thrilling first novel, *Housekeeping* (1980), reviewers have been pointing out that, for an analyst of modern alienation, she is an unusual specimen: a devout Protestant, reared in Idaho. She now lives in Iowa City, where she teaches at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and where, for years, she has been accustomed to interrupting her career as a novelist to produce essays on such matters as the truth of John Calvin's writings. But Robinson's Low Church allegiance has hugely benefited her fiction. It is certainly responsible, in part, for her extreme directness. In that bath scene, in *Lila*, the author lays out, right at the start, all the novel's main themes: suffering, abandonment, forgiveness, rescue, and then, in bracing counterpoise, the question of whether one actually wants to be rescued, or can be. The scene also contains the book's governing metaphor, water, which will wash away our sins--or not. And there, in the middle of the water, naked and screaming, is the book's heroine. She does not speak except to curse, Doll reports. She has no name that she can tell them. Eventually, the old woman says, 'I been thinking about "Lila." I had a sister Lila. Give her a pretty name, maybe she could turn out pretty.' After a few weeks, Doll and Lila take off down the road and join a work crew.

Some of us have met Lila before. Since *Housekeeping*, Robinson has written three novels--*Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008), and now *Lila*--centered in Gilead, Iowa, a dusty, no-account little town, where dogs take their naps in the middle of Main Street. Gilead, however, was once at the heart of a great passion. It

was a stop on the Underground Railroad and, in time, a hot spot of the Union Army's cause, under the town's Congregationalist minister, a fiery-eyed man who had audible conversations with Jesus. That man's son and then his grandson succeeded to his pulpit, and it is the grandson, John Ames, who is the most important figure in the series so far. In *Gilead*, Ames, as a young man, marries the girl whom everyone in town expects him to marry. She dies in childbirth, and the baby dies with her. Ames goes on alone. By day, he writes his sermons and reads books of philosophy, theology, and history. At night, he eats a fried-egg sandwich, listens to the radio, and goes to bed. This continues for forty years, and he expects it to continue for the rest of his life. But then, one Sunday, while he is preaching—he is now sixty-seven—the back door of the church opens, and a woman slips into the sanctuary, to get out of the rain. Her dress is shabby. Her eyes are sad. She didn't grow up to be pretty. It is Lila.

Their circumstances could not be more different. He is almost twice her age. Furthermore, he is an erudite man, however isolated and obscure, while she is a transient worker. In *Lila*, with her bedroll and a small suitcase (she owns two dresses), she goes from place to place, asking at houses in the towns and the countryside for a day's work. She was on her way to Sioux City when, approaching Gilead, she spotted an abandoned shack. She has been camping out there for a few weeks when, as she is walking in the town, a storm breaks and she ducks into Ames's church.

As Ames tells us in *Gilead*, he falls in love instantly, and though he is too modest to say that she seems attracted to him also, he hints at this. She asks him about the possibility of baptism. 'No one seen to it for me when I was a child,' she says. 'I been feeling the lack of it.' Most suggestively, she starts turning up in the garden behind his house, to tend to it—pull weeds, plant roses. (She has a special talent with roses.) At first, she makes sure to come when she knows he won't be there. Eventually, she omits that caution. Then, one evening, according to Ames, 'when I saw her there, out by the wonderful roses, I said, "How can I repay you for all this?" And she said, "You ought to marry me." And I did.' It is like a miracle: sudden, inexplicable.

Ames is a kind of character that people say novelists can't create, an exceptionally virtuous person who is nevertheless interesting. As it happens, he has a few failings. He is sometimes bitter about the fact that he has spent his life stuck in Gilead, baptizing babies (his brother became a professor, and an atheist), and he grieved that he had no children. His best friend, Robert Boughton, the town's Presbyterian minister, fathered eight. At times, when Boughton's children were still young, Ames couldn't bear to enter his friend's house. (If the two men were working together on a project, Boughton's wife would pack a dinner for them to eat in Ames's kitchen.)

Then comes Lila and, in short order, a child, Robby, named after Boughton. But no sooner does Ames receive these gifts than he is told that he must lose them. The doctor says that he has angina pectoris and won't live long. That would be hard enough, but Ames is desperately worried about how Lila and Robby will fare without him. Boughton has a son, Jack, who could be a character out of Dostoyevsky. As a boy, Jack liked to steal things, break things, and then smile when he was caught. As a young man, he got a fifteen-year-old country girl pregnant and promptly left town. Now, after twenty years, Jack has returned to Gilead, and Ames thinks he sees him hanging around Lila and Robby. What rises in his heart is not just concern but hatred.

Ames is a sort of visionary—a trait that would appear to mark him as saintly—but, as with other saints, not all of his visions are beautiful. In *Gilead*, he remembers a windy night when he walked beneath a row of oaks: 'They were dropping their acorns thick as hail almost. There was all sorts of thrashing in the leaves and there were acorns hitting the pavement so hard they'd fly past my head. All this in the dark, of course. I remember a slice of moon, no more than that. It was a very clear night, or morning, very still, and then there was such energy in these things transpiring among those trees, like a storm, like travail. I stood a little out of range, and I thought, It is all still new to me.' It's as though he had seen a ghost.

With all this in his head, plus the learned books, he can sometimes fail to notice what is in front of his face. When he speaks of his coming together with Lila, which he regards as the most glorious event of his life, what appears to please him most is the idea that he gave her a settled existence, a settled mind. 'It

seemed that all the wondering about life had been answered for her, once and for all,' he says. 'If that is true, it is wonderful.' It isn't true.

The most forceful piece of technical machinery operating in Robinson's Gilead books is point-of-view narration. *Gilead* is written in the first person: Ames speaking to us, or, rather, to Robby (it is a letter for the boy to read when he is grown). *Lila*, like *Home*, employs a tight—that is, heavily filtered—third-person. As Henry James put it, the narrative emerges from a 'central intelligence.' (Lila is 'she,' not 'I,' but everything is recorded as she alone sees it.) Each of the three Gilead books can stand on its own. I didn't hear anybody complaining, when *Gilead* was published, that we were getting only Ames's side of the story. Who cared about another side? Ames's point of view was truer, or at least more interesting, than any purportedly real truth. But now Robinson has followed up *Gilead* with *Home* and *Lila*, which often, while covering the same events as *Gilead*, contradict that book, and each other, too. Or, if they don't actually catch each other in lies, they still manage, by omission or inclusion or shading, to cast a different light on matters. Robinson is now very obtrusively using point of view. To what end?

Few people who have read *Gilead* will forget Ames's description of his and Lila's decision, among the roses, to get married—the speed, the wildness of it—but I hope nobody ever asks me to choose between that and the version that Lila, in *Lila*, gives of the same event. In her version, she is not in a nice, symbolic garden. She is walking down a dusty road, with Ames beside her. She didn't invite him to accompany her, and yet, once he does, she tells him that he should marry her. It's crazy, but so is his answer: 'You're right. I will.' Her rejoinder is equally crazy: 'All right. Then I'll see you tomorrow.' In fact, they have no plans to meet the next day. She is just saying that so that she can get away from him for a moment.

In Lila's life, one emotion trumps all others, and that is shame: over her poverty, her lack of beauty, her ignorance, and, since these facts determined her choices in life, over her life. She wasn't ditched just once but several times. She did a stint in a brothel, though she wasn't a very good prostitute—she couldn't see the point of high heels, for example—and she eventually switched to being the institution's cleaning lady. That was right before she went to Gilead. When she attends Ames's Sunday services, she always sits in the back row, so that no one can see her, judge her. But how, if she is so filled with shame, could she have proposed marriage to Ames? There, I think, lies the secret of Lila, as a character: boldness, the perception and expression of truth, combined with a certainty, based on her past experience, that she will be cast aside. That is what she expects from Ames, and after saying that she will see him tomorrow she scrupulously avoids him.

A few days later, he goes to her shack, and finds her coming up from the river, barefoot, with a catfish that she has just caught. He says that he has brought her a gift, his mother's locket: 'She felt her face warm. And the fish kept struggling, jumping against her leg. She said, "Damn catfish. Seems like you can never quite kill 'em dead. I'm going to just put it here in the weeds for a minute." And there it was, flopping in the dust. She wiped her hand on her skirt. "I can take that chain now, whatever it is." He said, "Excellent. I'm—grateful. You should put it on. It's a little difficult to fasten. My mother always asked my father to do it for her." Lila said, "Is that a fact," and handed it back to him. He studied her for a moment, and then he said, "You'll have to do something with your hair. If you could lift it up." So she did, and he stepped behind her, and she felt the touch of his fingers at her neck, trembling, and the small weight of the locket falling into place. Then they stood there together in the road, in the chirping, rustling silence and the sound of the river.'

After this beautiful scene, the only episode in *Lila* that you could call a sex scene, Ames says, 'So. Are we getting married or not?' Lila answers that she doesn't think it's a good idea. The abstemious Robinson allows Ames only a tiny, and therefore especially poignant, reaction. ('His face reddened and he had to steady his voice.') Lila quickly tries to explain. If she married him, she says, she would be the preacher's wife, and people would look at her all the time, to see if she measured up. She couldn't bear that. That's why she can't even get baptized. Ames protests that if she wants to get baptized they don't need a church. They can do it right there, in the field, with water from her bucket. '"Yes?" she says. "Then hold on".' And she goes to her shack and changes into a clean blouse. Then he baptizes her, resting his hand three times on her hair. She bursts into tears. Ames loans her his handkerchief.

‘Wait,’ she says to him. ‘Can you still get married to somebody you baptized?’ ‘No law against it,’ he says. She tells him that she wants him but that she doesn’t trust him not to discard her. (‘I done some things in my life’; she goes ahead and mentions the brothel.) Nor does she trust herself not to walk away from him. This long scene overflows with lyricism and tenderness and sensuousness—the locket, the tears, the trembling fingers—but buried in the middle is some dark, ugly business that you can’t fully see: Lila’s and Ames’s loneliness, endured for so many years, and probably largely ineradicable. As they embrace, the slimy catfish wriggles in the dirt, ready to die. When the afternoon is over, they have agreed to marry, and you feel as though you have to go lie down.

But Lila and Ames are not just a couple of people in Iowa. As much as Natasha Rostova and Andrei Bolkonsky, they represent their country’s history, and that is the second department in which Robinson has made point-of-view narration work for her powerfully. In *Gilead*, Ames tells us that his grandfather preached the town ‘into the war,’ the Civil War, with the result, Robinson suggests, that most of the young men in Gilead died. This turned the grandfather’s son, Ames’s father, into a pacifist. On Sundays, he did not attend his father’s service; he went to the Quakers instead, creating a terrible breach within the family. That is a flashback; *Gilead* is set mostly at the beginning of the civil-rights movement. *Home* takes place in the year of the Montgomery bus boycott, 1956. Boughton and Ames watch the events on Boughton’s new appliance, a television.

Lila is less concerned with race than just with poverty—indeed, starvation—among the migrant workers of the Midwest. We hear what they ate, when they had anything to eat: basically, fried mush. When Lila is abandoned for the second time, it is by a decent person, the head of the work crew that she and Doll joined at the beginning of the book. The crew can’t afford to feed her anymore. Robinson didn’t need point-of-view narration in order to delineate these matters, but she certainly makes it enrich the situation. In *Home*, Boughton, watching the Montgomery riots, says that the rioters are unwise to make such a fuss. He doesn’t know that his son Jack is married to a black woman whom he met after he left Gilead. Jack, returning to Gilead, asks Ames: could he and his wife and their son make a home in that town? Ames says no, for which he has a solid, political reason (a small black community was forced out of Gilead years earlier) and also a selfish, personal reason (Ames wants Jack nowhere near Lila). This is the way politics operates in our lives, on the bone.

Robinson’s use of politics is also, to some extent, a weakness of the Gilead novels. It is in these matters that we start to get clichés, so foreign, otherwise, to her work. Discussing the victims of the Dust Bowl, she apostrophizes: How can that be? ‘People only trying to get by, and no respect for them at all, even the wind soiling them.’ If I am not mistaken, what we are getting here is Robinson’s moral-essayist voice, in opposition to her novelistic voice. Both *Home* and *Lila* sag in the middle, as Robinson shakes her finger at whoever she thinks needs to learn a lesson. I’m not saying that great novelists haven’t done this before (see *War and Peace*), only that it didn’t necessarily benefit their work. Robinson writes about religion two ways. One is meliorist, reformist. The other is rapturous, visionary. Many people have been good at the first kind; few at the second kind, at least today.

The second kind is Robinson’s forte. She knows this, and works it. She inverts time, she loops it, she dispenses with whole chunks of it. (We never find out what Lila did for most of her adult life, before arriving in Gilead.) When Robinson likes an image, she’ll use it as many times as she wants to. If the young Lila gets ditched more than once, other children, too, are abandoned. Married and pregnant, Lila, in *Lila*, revisits her old shack and finds that it has been taken over by a boy, maybe twelve years old, who has been thrown out by his father. (The father chased him down the road, throwing rocks and sticks at him. ‘The way you’d chase off a dog,’ the boy says.) Winter is coming.

Lila, after hearing the boy’s story, goes back to town to get him some warm clothes and food. While she is gone, he takes fright and runs away, with nothing. A blizzard arrives, shutting Lila and Ames in their house. Sitting in their kitchen, playing cards and waiting for their baby to come, they are in a sort of daze—thrilled that their child is about to be born, but aware that another child, the renegade boy, is out there, dying in the snow. Add one boy; take one away. *Lila*—and *Home* also—is in many ways a realistic novel. It tells us how to make biscuits and harness a mule. At the same time, Robinson shows us griefs that go far beyond the bounds of realism. In *Housekeeping*, there’s a woman who is certain that she sees the ghosts of

naked little children by the road at night, hungry and crying. She puts out food for them. The dogs eat it. She puts out more. In a way, that's Marilynne Robinson.

But most of the time Robinson's people aren't actually starving; they're just alone. That is the final meaning of her insistence on her characters' own point of view: because they don't see the same reality, they are consigned to solitude. Lila tells us that, as Ames's wife, she was just as lonely as she had been before she married him. And the horrible, or at least extremely arresting, thing is that Robinson doesn't entirely regret the situation. Lila, soon after the birth of her son, begins having fantasies of opening her front door and walking back out into her old life, and taking the baby with her: 'But she imagined the old man, the Reverend, calling after them, "Where are you going with that child?" The sadness in his voice would be terrible. He would be surprised to hear it. You wouldn't even know your body had a sound like that in it. And it would be familiar to her. She didn't imagine it, she remembered that sadness from somewhere, and it was as if she would understand something if she could hear it again. That was what she almost wanted.' Life without comfort, without love, that is the real life, and Lila would like to understand why. This is an unflinching book."

Joan Acocella
The New Yorker
(6 October 2014)

"A fearsome act of spiritual bravery blazes at the center of Marilynne Robinson's new novel. A woman — newly baptized, newly married, newly pregnant--rises before daybreak, slips out of her marital bed, and goes to the river to wash 'in the water of death and loss and whatever else was not regeneration.' In other words, to unbaptize herself. The woman, Lila, is the wife of John Ames, the Congregationalist minister introduced to readers in Robinson's Pulitzer-winning, 2004 novel, *Gilead*, which took the form of a letter written by Ames to his young son. That glorious story was infused with wistfulness; Ames, almost 70 at the birth of this child, pens his epistle in 'the expectation of death.' It was infused, too, with balance and order. Even at his most anguished, Ames remains measured, his prose stately.

Lila, the third book in what has already become a classic series (*Home*, the second book, focused on Ames's neighbor, a Presbyterian minister, and the return of his prodigal son to Gilead, Iowa), is altogether different. For one thing, Lila, the young wayfarer Ames marries late in life, doesn't write her own story. We are privy to her thoughts, but kept at a mediating distance by third-person narration. For another, her recollections don't have his formal rhythms; they seem to gust willy-nilly, insisting themselves patchwork-like on her consciousness. And where Ames, though capable of desolation, is continually restored to peace by the discipline of his faith, Lila, having been offered for the first time in her life a hearth, feels an almost vascular tug toward the harsh rootlessness of her origins.

Her earliest memories: a house where people sleep on gunnysacks on the floor; a stoop where someone puts her if she cries; a table under which she learns to take refuge. This is her life until, feverish and hungry and covered with chigger bites, she is stolen one night, saved by a kindhearted itinerant named Doll, who delivers her into the slightly more hospitable wilderness of a life on the road. For years they travel with a small band of migrant workers, a life that offers scant structure, and no articulated system of belief. Wary of religion ('churches just want your money'), these travelers go without God.

Then the Dust Bowl comes, bringing with it biblical destruction. Violence and crime cause the group to scatter. Lila finds work in a whorehouse, then as a hotel maid. Eventually she drifts into Gilead, where she meets providence in the form of an abandoned shack. She holes up there, meaning to move on. But one wet morning, seeking shelter from the rain, she steps into a church. Ames is inside.

'She watched him and forgot she was in the room with him and he would see her watching. He baptized two babies that morning. He was a big, silvery old man, and he took each one of those little babies in his arms as gently as could be.' Even as she sits there (already, unbeknownst to her, falling in love), Lila reflects on her own abandonment and subsequent rebirth, 'the night Doll took her up from the stoop and put her shawl around her and carried her off through the rain.' The rain was not a true baptism, though, and before long, in a scene riven with beauty and pain and desire, Lila finds herself being properly baptized by the reverend down at the river. From one sacred rite they proceed swiftly to another: marriage.

Lila finds herself with child, and the scraps of memory that flutter and flap ceaselessly through her mind become doubly burdensome. ‘She thought, An unborn child lives the life of a woman it might never know, hearing her laugh or cry, feeling the scare that makes her catch her breath, tighten her belly.’ She worries that thoughts of her past will harm the infant in her womb. She worries her history of abandonment will repeat itself in a compulsion to abandon this life in Gilead. Perhaps most troublingly, she worries that embracing God means spurning Doll and those other ‘heathens’ who constituted the only family she’d ever known.

Which returns us to that terrible act of courage: Lila’s attempt to ‘[wash] the baptism off me.’ Here is a woman waging an interior battle between her sudden appetite for the illuminations of scripture and her love for those who rescued her from darkness. She cannot reconcile herself to the notion ‘that souls could be lost forever because of things they did not know, or understand, or believe.’ In her steely concentration and her shambolic purity, Lila harbors the potential to become a great, complex character--as great and complex, in her own way, as the Ames of *Gilead*, or the Sylvie of *Housekeeping*, Robinson’s 1980 novel, which portrayed a different sort of drifter, an unapologetically whimsical and enigmatic soul.

I read *Lila* anticipating a moment when she might grow fully into that potential, take her inner battle public, and engage her husband in urgent theological debate. We see a spark of willingness to do so. Late in the book, when the reverend declares, ‘God is good,’ Lila counters: ‘[S]ome of the time.’ What a rich feast of a novel this might have been had it chosen to explore that conflict wholly! And who better than Robinson, preeminent among contemporary American novelists in addressing the role of the sacred in our lives, to take that on? But the deck feels stacked. Unlike Ames, whose humanity Robinson brings so beautifully and complexly to life, Doll and her cohort read as types, like an idea of what destitute characters should be. And time and again she has Lila demur, self-efface, comply.

Her husband proceeds to correct her—‘All of the time.’--and their disagreement ends, as do a great number of their conversations, with Ames laughing. His laughter isn’t unkind or patronizing; he’s too modest and contemplative for that. But I couldn’t help feeling Robinson herself was being paternalistic, using her character’s laughter to derail further reckoning and assert her own dismissive certainties. In the final pages Lila appears intellectually and spiritually subdued, sitting with her just-baptized baby in her arms and thinking of something Ames always says, that ‘we should attend to things we have some hope of understanding, and eternity isn’t one of them…this world isn’t one either.’ I’m not sure the Lila who works so fiercely to scrub the baptismal waters off her soul ever gets her due.

Leah Hager Cohen
Boston Globe
(18 October 2014)

“Marilynne Robinson presents her devout readership with a conversion narrative…. The last three of Marilynne Robinson’s four novels—the Pulitzer-winning *Gilead*, *Home*, and now *Lila*—apply a canonical sheen to a small Iowa town, a world of dying fathers, prodigal and miracle sons, fallen women, and homemade chicken and dumplings. In each book the same events—often the same conversations—are witnessed and recalled from various, luminously drawn perspectives, layering into a kind of applied sanctity the course of more or less ordinary life.

An essentially religious writer, Robinson stands quite alone in this ‘unreligious age,’ as Iris Murdoch called it, in which we turn to art for an experience akin to prayer. With these novels, all of them wrought from theological concerns, Robinson has created a secular church of readers. *Lila* presents Robinson converts with a conversion narrative, describing in Christian terms the spiritual work her novels provide for readers of any or no religious calling. The novel centers on the title character, a onetime drifter with a difficult past who has moved to Gilead, Iowa, and married recurring Robinson character Reverend John Ames. Lila’s skepticism of the town’s deeply Christian ethos, epitomized by Ames’s mix of spiritual query and complacency, extends into her marriage and her own conversion to the faith.

Presbyterian-raised and a sometime Congregationalist deacon, Robinson, in her fiction, prefers candid allusion to allegory, a doctrinal transparency that itself grows transparent, absorbed into the psychological force of stories that unfold without resort to archetype, epiphany, or other blunt-force tools. When the

novels sermonize, it tends to occur within the description of actual sermons; more often they subtly build scriptural touchstones and theological debate into her characters' lives. Their struggles with connection, family, with their own natures and the nature of existence, reality, memory, consciousness—all are expressed as part of a spiritual conversation with no final answer.

Robinson's considered lack of answers surely helps engage those readers weary of binary politics or beset by religious ideology. 'Doctrine is not belief,' Reverend Ames writes to his young son Robby in Gilead, 'it is only one way of talking about belief.' In telling Robby his story, beginning with the begats, Ames inexorably moves toward the mystery at the heart of life, that of God's grace. 'You never do know the actual nature even of your own experience,' he writes, remembering (or misremembering) taking communion from his own father's hand.

Faced with this estrangement, Robinson's characters digress, in search of meaning and moments of connection, seeking however they can 'to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us.' Love is one reply to this predicament—a senseless quantity, 'the eternal breaking in on the temporal,' a parable of 'an embracing, incomprehensible reality.' The same might be said of the novel, an attempt to bridge, through loving effort, the unbridgeable. Robinson's genius is for making indistinguishable the highest ends of faith and fiction, evoking in her characters and her readers the paradox by which an individual, enlarged by the grace of God, or art, acquires selfhood in acquiring a sense of the world beyond the self—the sublime apprehension that other people exist.

Which is to say that Robinson's animating theme—grace—is also central to her genius. Described as 'a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials,' grace is evidenced in both the particular and the abstract: as laughter, a beloved face or voice, or as 'playing catch in a hot street…leaping after a high throw and that wonderful collaboration of the whole body with itself'; but also in forgetting 'all the tedious particulars,' in feeling the presence of a 'mortal and immortal being.' 'A character is really the sense of a character,' Robinson has written, and hers suggest, above the particulars, how the mysteries of grace persist in human beings, those wanting creatures who move Ames with their incandescence, the presence 'shaped around "I" like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else.'

Lila is more flame than wick, of feral upbringing, unsure of her real name or whether it matters. The novel begins with a kind of origin myth: One night, a drifter named Doll passes by a house with a small, miserable child shut out on the porch by her parents, like an unwanted pet. In an act of rescue or kidnapping, Doll wraps the child in a shawl and carries her off, soon naming her Lila. Through childhood and beyond, Doll mothers Lila under a banner of subsistence nihilism: Stay alive until you die. Little else matters, so 'just do what you're told and be quiet about it, that's all anybody is ever going to want from you.'

Rolling between the title character's present and her preceding decades of roaming, *Lila* parallels a coming into selfhood with an equally ambivalent coming into faith. Alone in her mid-thirties, with Doll gone, Lila washes from St. Louis into the town of Gilead, then into the church of Reverend Ames, whose sermons provoke in her a mixture of yearning and incredulity. The culture of community worship especially strikes Lila as a kind of collusion:

Let us pray, and they all did pray. Let us join in hymn number no matter what, and they all sang…. There was no need for any of it. The days came and went on their own, without any praying about it…. It was about the meaning of existence, he said. All right. She knew a little bit about existence. That was pretty well the only thing she knew about, and she had learned the word for it from him. It was like the United States of America—they had to call it something.

The murky status of Lila's soul marks her with God's grace, a sign most evident in her face, which she covers habitually. Ames marvels at the human face, especially Lila's, 'the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it.' Lila finds horror in that same idea: '[A face] can be something you want to hide, because it pretty well shows where you've been and what you can expect. And anybody at all can see it, but you can't. It just floats there in front of you. It might as well be your soul, for all you can do to protect it.'

More than Sunday worship, Lila is persuaded to believe by her private engagement with the Bible. Ezekiel especially captures Lila's imagination. Her apprehension of the nature and uses of myth appears at once to connect her to and free her from herself: That Ezekiel's winged chimera should appear in 'the likeness of a man' resonates with one who has 'the likeness of a woman, with hands but no face at all, since she never let herself see it. She had the likeness of a life, because she was all alone in it. She lived in the likeness of a house, with walls and a roof and a door that kept nothing in and nothing out.'

Throughout *Lila* and its predecessors, Robinson elucidates the struggle to reconcile likeness and original; temporal and eternal; memory and reality; physical and ephemeral; flame and wick—a struggle as productive as it is without ultimate hope. 'Near as I can tell,' Lila replies to Ames's rehearsal of a dense, Calvin-shaded sermon, 'you were wanting to reconcile things by saying they can't be reconciled.'

This is Ames's song, and it echoes in Lila, who values means over meaning, who grew up with Doll's refrain, 'Don't matter.' But Ames's acceptance of the irreconcilable is held within—is defined by—a larger belief system, one that allows for the possibility of grace. Lila's history, with its gradual acknowledgment that some things do matter, or at least that she wants them to, reveals a woman poised for such an allowance. For a while Lila finds distraction at the movies, which serve as her church, 'everybody in there dreaming one dream together.' If they prove inadequate, such experiences introduce Lila to her own hunger for love and story, desires that carry her outside of herself and into Gilead, where, compelled by Ames and his stories but skeptical of their claims on her, particularly where doctrine leaves her beloved Doll, she keeps one foot firmly out the door.

Desire. A bold word, perhaps, in Gilead, a world of worry, reverie, and exquisitely fraught interactions. The beauty of Robinson's prose suggests an author continually threading with spun platinum the world's finest needle. The satisfaction, the relief of it, is immense. But all that beauty may begin to hang on the reader, like a pristine garment despoiled by the faintest stain, such that eventually all the reader—the very base and perverse, Graham Greene–loving reader—cares to do is twist herself in the muck. 'Somebody,' I said, midway through *Lila*, turning, wide-eyed, to the man with whom I had spent an otherwise chaste week in a primly Christian maritime village, reading Robinson's novels in quick succession, 'needs to fuck somebody.'

Instead, Ames and Lila 'comfort' each other, in two sentences that form *Lila* and its predecessors' almost impossibly discreet reckoning with sexuality, a considerable feat given Lila's apparent history as a prostitute, which Ames absorbs without question. In writing otherwise vigorously involved in the nature of the physical world, specifically the connection of its wonders to a divine source, such effacement grows conspicuous. It also creates a rare gap in the author's endeavor to make numinous in her characters the whole of life.

But then Robinson's world is a likeness, rooted in the original but never fully reconciled to it. Standing in rejection of contemporary realism's command of irony and the revealing detail, Robinson's vision is 'wholly realist,' as she has written of her transcendentalist forebears, 'in acknowledging the great truth of the centrality of human consciousness.' In this vision, and in this return to Gilead—a world that exists only when imagined, and then indisputably—'creed falls away and consciousness has the character of revelation.' Her Lila is such a creation, possessed of a face much mentioned but only vaguely described and, by the novel's end, intimately known."

Michelle Orange
BookForum
(Sep/Oct/Nov 2014)

"In 1980, Marilynne Robinson published her first novel, *Housekeeping*, which was hailed as an instant classic. For the next 25 years she published no fiction, but several essays and two non-fiction books: *Mother Country*, a controversial account of the disaster at what is now Sellafield, and *The Death of Adam*, a collection of provocative polemical essays. In 2004, she unexpectedly published a second novel, *Gilead*, which won the Pulitzer prize, and was widely extolled. Four years later she returned to the fictional terrain of Gilead, Iowa, with *Home*, which won the Orange prize for fiction. And now comes *Lila*, the third Gilead novel; it is a finalist for this year's National Book award, announced this month, and many people consider

it a favourite to win. After just four novels, Robinson is frequently named one of America's most significant writers; the Gilead novels in particular have been heaped with praise, regularly appearing on lists of the greatest contemporary American fiction.

But this does not mean they have always been thoroughly understood. Robinson is known for the religious convictions that fortify her work, but her theological preoccupations are part of a larger moral vision that is not incompatible with a redoubtable skepticism. In particular, the Gilead novels can be read as an act of national and cultural recovery, resurrecting powerful ghosts to remind America of a forgotten moral lineage. Some readers argue that Robinson's intelligence, deep historical reading and cultural heterodoxy chafe against her lyrical prose, rapturous sensibility and spiritual quests. But they all contribute to her fiercely independent perspective and the poignancy of her subtle exploration of character. 'A question is more spacious than a statement,' she once wrote, 'far better suited to expressing wonder.' Her questioning books express wonder: they are enlightening, in the best sense, passionately contesting our facile, recycled understanding of ourselves and of our world. The one thing Robinson can be counted on to resist is received wisdom. At the end of an essay called 'Psalm Eight', she wrote that we all 'exist in relation to experience, if we attend to it and if its plainness does not disguise it from us, as if we were visited by revelation'. There are revelations waiting in her novels, if we attend to them.

To start with a deceptively simple example, at the end of *Gilead*, a dying minister writes his final sentence: 'I'll pray, and then I'll sleep.' These valedictory words come from *King Lear*: as he and the Fool seek shelter from the raging storm, Lear discovers compassion for the 'houseless poverty' of people like Poor Tom. This sentence marks Lear's great shift into a moral accountability based on care: he was supposed to safeguard the 'poor naked wretches / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm.' 'Oh,' Lear realizes, 'I have ta'en / Too little care of this!'

John Ames, Robinson's protagonist, has been writing a family chronicle, telling the story of his "begats" for the young son he will not live to see grow up. Robinson gives no indication that the novel's concluding line comes from *Lear*; most readers seem to have overlooked it. But the original context means these apparently tranquil words signal a rushing epiphany. Ames, like Lear, has taken too little care; he has failed to be his brother's keeper. This acknowledgment detonates an irony that reverberates back through the whole novel, for Ames is well intentioned, gentle, benign, but he proves far more unreliable than we thought. He has been telling his son the story of how southwestern Iowa was settled during the civil war, how bitterly his abolitionist grandfather was disappointed by the false peace of reconstruction and the injustices of Jim Crow. The novel's final events, in which Ames admits that a mixed-race family in 1957 cannot hope for security in Gilead, have forced him to acknowledge his own failure to defend racial and social justice.

Knowing others might feel a 'sense of irony at having invested hope in this sad old place', Ames also realises the pain of having to relinquish hope in Gilead, for it was precisely what 'the place was meant to encourage, that a harmless life could live here unmolested… These little towns were once the bold ramparts meant to shelter just such peace.' Over his long, lonely life, Ames gradually lost sight of his responsibility to comfort his town's dispossessed. The black church in Gilead burned to the ground, its congregation scattered, and Ames barely noticed. But just because he failed to pay attention does not mean the reader should make the same mistake.

Home (2008) retold the same events from the perspective of the sister of Ames's godson, Jack Boughton, the prodigal son returning to Gilead in search of a home for his mixed-race family. His father, Robert, a Presbyterian minister and Ames's lifelong best friend (another apparently good man, although the town's mayor calls him 'that grasping hypocrite'), is also failing; Jack fears that learning of his biracial family might endanger his father's health. Both novels take place across 1956-1957, as the civil rights movement took flight: in Home old Boughton dismisses Gilead's abolitionist history as fanaticism, invoking the Bible to rationalize social conservatism, unthinkingly espousing the segregationist logic ('I think we had all better just keep to ourselves') and passive racism ('I have nothing against the coloured people. I do think they're going to need to improve themselves, though') that drive his beloved son from his house. Serenity can be an ethical failure, Robinson suggests, if it derives from complacency, from being too much at ease with oneself.

Which brings us to *Lila*, the latest Gilead novel, telling the story of John Ames's much younger wife, a pivotal but shadowy character until now. A drifter, Lila was raised in 'houseless poverty', we learn, wandering America with a woman named Doll, who rescued Lila from a childhood of violent neglect. Lila meets Ames in his church, when she ducks in to avoid a rainstorm (a detail Robinson repeats in both *Gilead* and *Lila*). As her story opens, she remembers being a small child locked out of a cabin all night, listening to the squabbling voices within who refuse to respond to her cries. It may be another reimagining of Lear's lament: 'To shut me out!… In such a night as this!' Lila becomes a representative wanderer, the outcast on the heath, to whom Ames gives shelter from the storm. 'Her destitution has made her purely soul, unaccommodated, as King Lear might say,' Robinson noted in an interview. *Lila* illustrates what Robinson described in *Home* as humanity's 'odd capacity for destitution,' 'as if we are shockingly unclothed when we lack the complacencies of ordinary life. In destitution, even of feeling or purpose, a human being is more hauntingly human.' We can only ask 'how the soul could be put at ease, restored. At home. But the soul finds its own home if it ever has a home at all.' This is the spiritual journey followed by Lila, a fiercely unaccommodated soul who may never be at home.

Appropriately, this story of a migrant wanders farthest afield from the plot of the first two novels. We discover that the character viewed as 'gentle' by all those around her is, inside her own head, fierce, resistant, obstinate. In many ways, *Lila* hearkens back to *Housekeeping*, which ends with its protagonist deciding to reject domesticity and choose drifting: 'Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping.' Here the trajectory reverses: Lila, a drifter her entire life, tries to keep house, learning to balance her untamed sense of herself with her growing fidelity to Ames.

Lila and Ames are such reserved, introverted characters that there is less social complexity in *Lila* than in Robinson's other novels--but there is more exploration of the intractability of individuality. Two people who feel forsaken find a sanctuary in each other they can neither express nor trust; their hesitant, fearful romance is intensely affecting. Lila is by no means certain that she welcomes love; reticence and shame mingle with a powerful need to respect the truth of her own experience. Perhaps *Gilead* emerges as the most intellectual of the three books, *Home* the most political, *Lila* the most emotional. Together they are masterclasses in the use of perspective, overlapping, often narrating the same events, but from sharply divergent standpoints. For all their thematic consonance, they are startlingly different novels. *Gilead* seems to me the greatest, but *Lila* still offers Robinson's characteristic delights: glorious prose, subtle wisdom and a darkly numinous atmosphere, lit at moments by a visionary wonder shading into exaltation. Many novelists are adept at moving their readers to tears of easy sentiment, but Robinson shakes us into weeping. Not for nothing does the passion of the Christ also denote his suffering.

All three novels present loneliness as the human condition, suggesting that if our imprisonment within our own perspectives tempts us toward judgmentalism, then compassion is the best palliative. In a pivotal scene repeated in *Gilead* and *Home* (but absent from *Lila*), Jack Boughton and Lila ask the two old ministers how salvation is possible if people are predestined to damnation? When neither minister answers adequately, Lila offers her own testament: 'A person can change. Everything can change.' As she walks home with her husband, who has failed to provide Jack with the spiritual comfort he sought, Lila offers a 'rebuke' to Ames's failure of compassion: 'Maybe some people aren't so comfortable with themselves.'

The implication that discomfort might be a saving grace, a guard against complacency, is vintage Robinson, a woman who has a character describe heaven itself as 'a place where I have always known I would not be comfortable'. In a 1985 essay, Robinson observed: 'Starting at *Gilgamesh* and reading forward, I find no evidence that consciousness has ever been a comfortable experience.' This is certainly true for Lila, a character marked by profound existential unease. She spends much of her story worried about damnation, not for herself, but for those she loved who are not saved according to orthodox faith. Lacking the security to declare, like Emerson, 'if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil', Lila comes to an ingenious conclusion. Because no concept of paradise could accommodate knowledge that our loved ones suffer eternal torment, Lila decides that the unsaved must get a free pass from the saved who love them, a kind of plus-one invitation to heaven. This is probably casuistry, but it feels like grace: only in *Lila*, the most redemptive of the three Gilead novels, does reconciliation become possible.

Any writer as Bible-steeped as Robinson will produce parables, but her stories encompass political, intellectual and literary histories as well as the spiritual quandaries more obviously preoccupying her. Reviewing *Gilead*, the English critic James Wood called it a novel 'out of time', apparently blind to the novel's deep engagement with American history. Similarly, Diane Johnson wrote in the *New York Times* of *Lila*: "Very few allusions link life in Gilead to particular historical events, though a character once mentions that he might vote for Eisenhower. Nor is this novel about the specifics of Iowa." *Lila* may be less about the specifics of Iowa than the first two, but all three books link life in Gilead to the history of its region, the place that Robinson (like F. Scott Fitzgerald before her) always calls 'the Middle West'.

The town of Gilead serves as an emblem of the forgotten past of the middle west, a 'highly distinctive and crucial region', Robinson argued in one essay, 'that is very generally assumed to have neither culture nor history'. We should ask ourselves, she suggested, 'where those audiences came from whose intelligence and patience and humanity taught and encouraged Abraham Lincoln to speak as he did, and why national leadership--Lincoln, Grant, Sherman and so many others--emerged from the middle west during the crisis of the civil war, and where the middle west acquired its special tradition of intellectualism and populism, moral seriousness and cultural progressivism.' The national United States is traversed by the conflicts of a symbolic map, our nation's moral compass divided across east and west, north and south. In this imaginary landscape, the midwest is only invoked as a nostalgic fantasy erasing its specific history and character, an absent centre marginalized, dismissed as 'flyover country'. (I should perhaps add here that I come from the midwest, where my family has lived for generations, so I have a stake in this discussion.)

To be precise, the history that Robinson excavates, particularly in *Gilead*, is that of the migration from New England of Calvinist abolitionists and utopians, catalyzed by the great religious revival in the 1830s called the Second Great Awakening and the spirit of moral reform that flooded America in its wake. Among them were Lyman Beecher and his family (including his daughter Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose encounters with midwestern progressivism would inspire *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the single most influential abolitionist tract in history); the preachers who founded Oberlin and Grinnell Colleges, among the first US universities to admit women and African Americans; the fanatical abolitionist John Brown; and many others who saw themselves as re-enacting the settlement of New England by their Puritan forebears, part of an ongoing pattern of westward expansion in the name of religious and political freedom. Some were instrumental in fomenting the border skirmishes of Bleeding Kansas in the late 1850s that led directly to the civil war; among them were John Todd, who followed John Brown, who used his house as a station on the underground railroad, and is the inspiration for the grandfather in *Gilead*. An exact century later, his grandson remains willfully innocent about the civil rights movement, although it is the direct consequence of the story he is recounting.

Thus Ames's casual remark that he will vote for Eisenhower is in fact a critical detail. Ames votes Republican, as Robert Boughton scoffs, 'because his grandfather was Republican! That's what it comes down to for people around here. Whose grandfather was not a Republican?' Boughton has it backwards: everyone's grandfather was Republican because everyone's grandfather was abolitionist. What became reflexive tribal loyalty sprang from a position of revolutionary conviction, which is why both John Ames and Jack Boughton quote President Grant calling their state 'the shining star of radicalism'.

Hearing Iowa hailed as a beacon of radicalism should bring any American reader up short: far from symbolizing radical progressivism, Iowa today is our national token of middle American conservatism. Robinson said it took 18 months to write *Gilead*, so it was presumably composed in the wake of the September 11 attacks. The grandfather in *Gilead* could be called a terrorist: he's a militant fanatic willing to kill to achieve his religious vision. His son reacts with a pacifism that degrades into anodyne passivity, as he declares the struggles of the civil war best forgotten, and betrays his heritage by retiring to Florida like a car salesman. No one's position is innocent, as Robinson asks some very trenchant questions about the moral grounds on which America stands.

Far from being 'out of time', all three Gilead novels engage with the problems that shape contemporary American experience. The plot of *Home* is driven by the unfinished struggle for civil rights, while the city Lila leaves just before coming to Gilead is St. Louis, a current nexus of American concerns about racial violence and economic inequality. Robinson couldn't have known when she wrote *Lila* that St. Louis

would erupt into protest this year, but she knew that Americans tend to imagine that little of national importance happens in the midwest. The genealogy she is tracing reveals our own failures to accept the burden of our country's moral and cultural inheritance.

The parable Robinson offers in *Lila* is far more explicit than in the first two novels: Lila's memories of Depression-era itinerants, workers' camps and revival meetings in the Dust Bowl recall *The Grapes of Wrath*; Lila herself evokes women like Dorothea Lange's iconic 1936 photograph "Migrant Mother". Robinson is also paying homage, I suspect, to Harriette Arnow's 1954 novel *The Dollmaker*, a neglected American classic alluded to in *Home*, describing an indigent woman's migration through the midwest. Robinson gives Lila a mother figure named Doll and sends her two women on a similar journey. Like all of Robinson's characters, Arnow's dollmaker wrestles with questions of faith and betrayal, as she tries to decide whether to carve a doll with the face of Jesus or the face of Judas. John Ames urges Lila to read the gospel of St. Matthew, but the stories to which she is most strongly drawn are those of Job, the suffering everyman, and Ezekiel. Lila sees in Ezekiel a version of her own life, an infant cast out for no reason, saved by a stranger and exhorted 'Live!' But Ames also explains to her that the Faithless Bride is a parable for Jerusalem's moral failures, its ingratitude to God, what we might call its selling out. Ames doesn't mention this, but God also chastises Jerusalem in Ezekiel for forgetting its own past and building beautiful shrines to itself.

The town of Gilead thus comes to stand, in its amnesia, isolation, good intentions and broken covenants, not only for the middle west, but as an image of America itself. William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County may cast a long shadow behind Gilead, but whereas Faulkner rewrites the notorious history of the American south, Robinson recovers a lost vision of the heartland. We may retain the communal hope that a harmless, peaceful life should be sheltered within our nation's bold ramparts, but a failure of care always marks a failure of the American dream, as characters from *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Great Gatsby's* Nick Carraway have taught us. Together the Gilead novels rebuke contemporary carelessness, asking us to be less comfortable, to stop building shrines to ourselves and start reimagining the commonweal.

Lila is also the Gilead novel that is most willing to offer hymns to the American land itself, 'the raggedy meadows and pastures and the cornfields and the orchards…the buzz and the smell and the damp of it, the breath of it like her own breath, her own sweat'. Robinson's use of the landscape throughout *Lila* most obviously recalls Emerson, especially a famous line from *Nature*, to which Ames alludes in *Gilead*: 'The world is emblematic…the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind.' We are meant to keep reading, in order to trace our 'begats'.

Some readers accuse Robinson of preaching; others complain when her novels 'stray' into politics. But history, moral reform and theology are inextricable from the wonder she expresses and the wisdom she imparts: we can't have one without the others. Robinson cheerfully admits that questions of character drive her novels, 'to the detriment of plot, I have been told'. Some may consider networks of relationships uneventful, but Robinson said after *Home* was published that she feels literature has enough 'whale hunts and sword fights and wars in heaven'. She found more meaningful, she declared, 'the movement from estrangement to trust'--precisely the movement traced in *Lila*. 'Loyalty and trust, and courtesy, and kindness, and sensitivity,' she insisted, are beautiful and require 'alertness' and 'patience'.

All of Robinson's novels require alertness and patience: they demand that we attend, in both senses of the word, that we wait, and pay attention. And they remind us that redemption may not be a comfortable experience. Like her creator, Lila finds consolation in unfamiliar places, in a sense of estrangement that lets her find America anew: 'Fear and comfort could be the same thing. It was strange, when she thought of it. The wind always somewhere, trifling with the leaves, troubling the firelight. And that smell of damp earth and bruised grass, a lonely, yearning sort of smell that meant, Why don't you come back, you will come back, you know you will'."

Sarah Churchill
The Guardian
(November 2014)

"Marilynne Robinson's new novel, *Lila*, has been one of the most anticipated books of the season. Robinson, who was born in Idaho and now teaches at the Iowa Writers Workshop, is a seventy-one-year-old Christian woman. She writes novels that are explicitly religious in a distinctly American way. She has praised John Calvin, the severe proponent of the doctrine of predestination, as a misunderstood Christian humanist. In other words, everything about her flies in the face of what the literati would consider sophisticated, cool, creative, and good, which is why her literary stardom is a particular curiosity.

Robinson broke onto the literary scene in 1980 with her first novel *Housekeeping*, about two sisters in the aftermath of their mother's suicide. She has continued to dazzle readers since. *Gilead*, published a decade ago, took the form of a letter that the seventy-seven-year-old Reverend John Ames, a pastor of the Congregational Church in the Iowa town of Gilead, writes to his seven-year-old son on the eve of the old man's death. *Gilead*, which sometimes reads more like theology than contemporary fiction, is a contemplative meditation on faith and being. It won the Pulitzer in 2005 and Robinson was awarded a National Humanities Medal in 2012.

While *Gilead* is the story of Ames, *Lila*, currently a finalist for the National Book Award, tells the life story of Ames's wife, a deeply introspective woman nearly half his age. The story, set about a decade earlier than *Gilead*, begins when a young Lila is cast out of her home. A band of drifters takes Lila, and, homeless and hungry, they move from town to town in search of work. One of the drifters, Doll, becomes like a mother to Lila. But after Doll and the rest of Lila's makeshift family nearly abandon her at one point, Lila is left to conclude: 'Can't trust nobody.' This is the plight of the orphan. Lila learns that she should never wholly give in to the comfort of love because even those that she wants to trust, like Doll, could one day abandon her.

By the time Lila is a grown woman, Doll is out of the picture. Lila finds her way to Gilead, where she begins an unlikely courtship with Ames. We learn that Ames immediately falls in love with her when she wanders into his church on the day of Pentecost, seeking shelter from the rain. But Lila's turbulent past, which has taught her to keep a distance from other people, creates a gulf between her and Ames. Lila's moral development, especially in he courtship with the Reverend Ames, revolves around closing that gulf. Lila, who had given up hope of marrying and settling in one place, suddenly discovers that she has a home and the comfort of a family. The stability this provides has at last penetrated her life.

But fear—which Robinson said in a recent interview is 'the default posture of human beings'—holds her back. 'Can't trust nobody,' she repeats after she begins to fall in love with Ames: 'That's what I'm thinking all the time.' But she figures, 'If I'm ever going to try it, it might as well be now, when I can leave if I have to and I'm still young enough to get by for awhile. When it won't much matter if it don't work out.' She thinks about leaving him before he has the chance to hurt her. Her independence, she thinks, is her strength. Love and marriage, which represent dependency, will only make her vulnerable and weak.

'If she told him how strange and alone she felt,' Robinson writes, 'and wanted to feel, he would wonder why she stayed with him at all. Now that there might be a child she'd best try to act like she belonged there, at least for a while.' Lila, who once worked in a brothel to get by, does not quite trust Ames in the early days of their marriage. She is reluctant to reveal the hard and even sinful details of her life to the pious and compassionate preacher. 'They never spoke of any of it, not one word in all those years,' Robinson writes of Lila's past. By the end of the novel, though, it is a different story. The last line of the book is, 'Someday she would tell him what she knew.' This is a far cry from 'Can't trust nobody.' It reveals a willingness to trust Ames and foreshadows the strength and security of their relationship in *Gilead* a few years later.

Why does Lila suddenly feel comfortable enough with herself and with Ames to take a step in the direction of love and trust? One answer is motherhood. The first person Lila totally trusts is her unborn son. During her pregnancy, she tells him stories from her past that she does not tell Ames. As a mother, she discovers what it means to love another creature with the wholeness of her heart. It is rejuvenating and transformative. 'She has grown younger over the years,' Ames writes at one point in *Gilead* to his son, 'and that was because of you.'

In a beautiful passage toward the end of the novel, after she has given birth to the child, Lila finally realizes how she has changed. She remembers back to one time, early in her courtship with Ames, when he took off his black preacher coat and put it on her shoulders—'the comfort he put around her, the warmth of his body still in that coat' gave her consolation. 'It was a shock to her,' Robinson writes, 'a need she only discovered when it was satisfied, for those few minutes.' As she works through that memory, Lila comes to see that she distanced herself from Ames, even treating him meanly in those early days of their relationship, not out of strength, as she once thought, but out of weakness: 'She wasn't married to him yet, so she still thought sometimes, Why should he care? What is it to him? That was loneliness. When you're scalded, touch hurts, it makes no differences if it's kindly meant.' But now, it was different, he was old and she would miss him when he died; 'Now he could comfort her with a look. And what would she do without him. What would she do.'

Lila is, in addition to many other things, a coming-of-age story. The lonely orphan, the sinning drifter, the tough girl who insisted 'can't trust nobody,' has come to finally know what it means to love someone and be loved in return. The hard independence of her childhood has yielded to the new reality of family, which in some ways leaves her more vulnerable than before. In this new world, Lila must prepare herself for the coming grief of losing Ames to death and losing her child to adulthood and all of its obligations. But she comes to see that the loss—whether a result of abandonment, death, or the general forward motion of life—is not just the plight of the orphan. It is the human condition. Any human being who devotes himself to another in love runs the risk of losing the one they love. Rather than resist loving someone else and being loved in return, which would be a sign of stunted development, she yields to love and reconciles herself to loss.

Robinson's novels offer a vision of the world that is in short supply in our culture. Against the cynicism of contemporary fiction—and contemporary culture more generally—which dwells on the darkness and degradations of man, Robinson focuses on what is good in people, like Lila, whose life is improved by a loving marriage rather than undone by her past. Robinson's approach is compassionate and humane.

Yes, Robinson writes about religion in the novel, but the religious themes she addresses—like suffering, rebirth, separation, and the redemptive power of love—represent universal aspects of the human experience. 'There's a lot of writing about religion with a cold eye,' Robinson recently said, referring specifically to the works of Flannery O'Connor, another religious writer with a connection to the Iowa Writers' Worskshop, 'but virtually none with a loving heart.' Robinson, pouring her love into the objects of her creation, allows her characters to be transformed by goodness and by grace. At a time when so much in our culture brings people down, Robinson, in telling the story of Lila's struggle from fear and loneliness to love and grace, writes to inspire and elevate the human soul—and this, to readers, is infectious."

Emily Esfahani Smith
"Learning to Love"
The New Criterion 33.5
(January 2015) 81-83